

Message Text

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SUBJECT: KNESSET APPROVES DIRECT ELECTION OF MAYORS

SUMMARY: AFTER NINE YEARS OF PROTRACTED AND TOUGH POLITICAL STRUGGLE, KNESSET JULY 29 FINALLY PASSED LEGISLATION FOR DIRECT ELECTION OF MAYORS CONSTITUTING FIRST BREAKTHROUGH SINCE ESTABLISHMENT OF STAT IN PARTY LIST SYSTEM OF ELECTIONS. PROPONENTS OF NATIONWIDE ELECTORREFORM VIEW KNESSET ACTION AS SIGNIFICANT PRECEDENT AND ARE PLANNING TO RENEW STALLED CAMPAING TO FORCE THROUG LEGISLATION FOR SWEEPING OVERHAUL OF ELECTION SYSTEM BEFORE 1977 ELCTION. END SUMMARY.

1. KNESSET JULY 29 PASSED LEGISLATION FOR DIRECT ELECTION OF MAYORS, 78-7-2, BRINGING TO SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION POLITICAL STRUGGLE WHICH HAD STARTED NINE YEARS AGO TO CHANGE LIST SYSTEM IN WHICH CITY COUNCIL APPOINTED MAYOR FROM ITS RANKS. BILL RECEIVED SUPPORT OF ALL PARTIES EXCEPT MAPAM, AGUDA ISRAEL AND RAKAH.

2. NEW LAW PROVIDES THTAT MAYORS WILL BE ELECTED BY
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DIRECT, POPULAR VOTE. MAJOR PARTIES HAVE AGREED TO

AMEND A KEY PROVISION OF LAW IMMEDIATELY AFTER KNESSET RETURNS FROM ITS SUMMER RECESS IN LATE OCTOBER, REDUCING PERCENTAGE OF POPULAR VOTE REQUIRED FOR ELECTION FROM 50PERCENT TO 40PERCENT. THIS COMPROMISE PROVISION, WORKED OUT BETWEEN LABOR PARTY AND LIKUD--HAS MADE POSSIBLE PASSAGE OF LAW, SINCE ON BASIS OF PAST EXPERIENCE MAJOR PARTIES BELIEVE THAT THEIR CANDIDATES HAVE GOOD CHANCE TO WIN 40 PERCENT. WE UNDERSTAND THAT LIBERAL PARTY (LIKUD) MK JOSEPH TAMIR WAS CENTRAL FIGURE IN HAMMERING OUT LAST-MINUTE COMPROMISE BY WHICH LIKUD, NRP AND OTHERS WITHDEW FROM DEMAND FOR 50PERCENT REQUIREMENT, AND LABOR BACKED AWAY FROM ITS EARLIER PROPOSAL TO PASS DECISION IN SECOND ROUND BACK TO CITY COUNCILS. LAW NOW PROVIDES THAT FAILURE OF ANY SINGLE CANDIDATE TO WIN 40 PERCENT IN FIRST ROUND WILL LEAD TO DIRECT ELECTION RUN-OFF WITHIN TWO WEEKS BETWEEN TWO TOP CONTENDERS.

3. STORMY PARLIAMENTARY RECORD --LEGISLATION HAD BEEN FIRST PROPOSED IN 1966 AND HAD BEEN BLOCKED THREE TIMES-- UNDERSCORES SIGNIFICANCE OF KNESSET ACTION, FROM DEEPLY-ENTRENCHED AND ANTI-DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS ALMOST ALL PARTIES PAY LIP-SERVICE TO PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY AND BENEFITS OF POPULAR VOTING. BUT AT SAME TIME TODAY'S LEADERS--AT ALL LEVELS AND IN ALL PARTIES--ARE BENEFICIARIES OF LIST SYSTEM, AND MANY OF THEM HAVE NEARED AND OPPOSED REFORM AS THREAT TO THEIR POWER. BEHIND SCENES MANIPULATION OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCESS HAS ENABLED OPPONENTS TO HOLD BACK REFORM TIDE FOR MANY YEARS.

4. WITHIN BOTH LABOR ALIGNMENT AND LIKUD, THERE HAVE BEEN DEEP DIVISIONS OF OPINION ON DIRECT ELECTION ISSUES. IT WAS ONLY AFTER 1973 ELECTION THAT REFORM ELEMENTS WITHIN THESE TWO PRINCIPAL CAMPS MANAGED TO OVERCOME INTERNAL OPPOSITION AND MOVED AHEAD FORCEFULLY. ELEMENTS OF MAPAM REMAINED UNCONVINCED TO THE END, WARNING THEIR KNESSET COLLEAGUES THAT MAYORALTY REFORM PRESAGED OVERHAUL OF NATIONAL ELECTIONS IN WHICH THEIR OWN FUTURES WOULD BE JEOPARDIZED, WHILE HERUT PARTY (LIKUD) AGREED ONLY WITH GREAT RELUCTANCE TO SUPPORT COMPROMISE PROPOSAL. IN RETROSPECT, EXPERIENCE IN 1973 TEL AVIV LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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MAYORALTY ELECTION HAD MARKED TURNING POINT FOR MAJORITY OF LIKUD. IN THAT ELECTION, LABOR, THE LOSER IN POPULAR VOTE, HAD TRIED TO OUT-MANEUVER LIKUD BY FORMING COALITION WITH MINORITY PARTIES TO KEEP INCUMBENT MAYOR RABINOWITZ IN OFFICE. MANEUVER FAILED, BUT TRIGGERED LIKUD INTO ACTION.

5. KNESSET DECISION IS PRELUDE TO RENEWED EFFORT TO

PUCH THROUGH LEGISLATION ON NATIONWIDE ELECTORAL REFORM
WHICH WOULD REPLACE CURRENT LIST SYSTEM WITH MIXED
REGIONAL CONSTITUENCY LIST SYSTEM. INITIATIVE HAS
BEEN STALLED EVER SINCE GAD YAACOB (NOW MINTRANSPORT)
INTRODUCED DRAFT PROPOSAL IN APRIL 1974 (TEL AVIV 2013).
ADVOCATES OF SUCH REFORM ARE ENCOURAGED BY POSITIVE
OUTCOME ON MAYORALTY ELECTION ISSUE AND WILL TRY TO
ACHIEVE SIMILAR RESULTS BEFORE NEXT NATIONWIDE ELECTION
FOR KNESSET PRESENTLY SCHEDULED FOR DECEMBER 1977.
GIVEN FORCES OF INERTIA AND RESISTANCE, OUT PROGNOSIS
OF THEIR PROSPECTS AT PRESENT IS DISTINCTLY RESERVED.
MUCH WILL DEPEND ON WHETHER PRIME MINISTER WILL DECIDE
TO PUT THIS AUTHORITY BEHIND REFORM PROPOSAL OR TO STALL
ON ISSUE UNTIL AFTER NEXT ELECTION.
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